

# Political Sociology: Introduction and Methodology

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## Why have this lecture?

- ▶ Some aren't sure at this stage whether this is something they want to do.
- ▶ Not so obvious what political sociology is compared with other subjects
- ▶ Helpful to have a brief tour of the topics to inform choice for tutorials
- ▶ Introduction to the style of social enquiry, complementary to the Q-Step Political Analysis courses
- ▶ Particular issues with how to engage with a mixture of different kinds of study with different data and methodology
- ▶ General study advice

# What is political sociology?

## Grand definitions:

- ▶ Who gets what, when and how (i.e. power)
- ▶ How political outcomes affect and are affected by social circumstances.
  - ▶ e.g. how class and inequality affect demand for welfare states and how different kinds of welfare states have different impacts on inequality and class

## More informal definitions

- ▶ It's about people and how they relate to politics
  - ▶ What people think about politics, what policies they want, what makes them participate and at what level, what divides or unites them etc.
  - ▶ Things that affect political preferences, attitudes, values and behaviour in society at large.
  - ▶ But also how that goes on to affect policy and other political outcomes, including regime type.
- ▶ While Comparative Government focuses on the political institutions (the sausage machine of politics), Political Sociology focuses on the social circumstances in which those institutions work (i.e. what goes into the sausage machine).

## Intellectual background

- ▶ Usually Political Sociology is a branch of sociology, but this course is mostly political science but also has sociology, and to a lesser extent psychology, economics and anthropology.
- ▶ It is mainly Political Behaviour and part of a broader 'Comparative Politics' field.
- ▶ Sociological tradition treats politics as part of broader society and social system
  - ▶ e.g. Weber pointed to modernization increasing 'rationality' in society which affected the structure of the state
  - ▶ For Marx the political sphere is part a broader class conflict
- ▶ Founding fathers Marx, Weber and Durkheim are now considered part of an 'historical sociology' literature
- ▶ These traditions strongest in social movements, nationalism, revolutions, state formation and elites topics.

# Topics in the Course I

## **Public Opinion related**

- ▶ *Political culture and social capital:*
  - ▶ Political culture is how how people think about the state and politics
  - ▶ Social capital is combination of norms, networks and trust from social interaction
  - ▶ Some argue that democracy is better when supported by a civic political culture with lots of bridging social capital.
  - ▶ But social capital and trust in politicians and democratic institutions are supposedly in decline.
  - ▶ So does this bode badly for democracy?
- ▶ *Social attitudes and value change:*
  - ▶ Why have people become more liberal over recent decades?
  - ▶ Why has concerns about climate change fluctuated and become politically polarized even while the evidence for man-made climate change has increased?
  - ▶ Why do societies swing back and forth from left to right in their policy preferences overtime?

# Topics in the Course II

- ▶ *Media:*

- ▶ Do the media succeed at informing the public and inspiring them to participate in politics?
- ▶ Or do the media dumb down and encourage voters to focus on leaders and looks instead of policies?
- ▶ How much power do the media have to influence voters?
- ▶ How has the internet changed political communications?

# Topics in the Course III

## **Political Action and Participation:**

- ▶ *Political participation*: demonstrations, petitions, writing to MPs, voter turnout etc.
  - ▶ Electoral turnout is in decline but other forms of participation are supposedly on the rise. Really? Why?
  - ▶ Why do some people participate but not others?
  - ▶ How rational is participation given that there's little chance of making a difference individually?
- ▶ *Social movements*: how organisations mobilise and when they succeed
  - ▶ Why are some campaign groups better than others at getting members and attention for their causes?
  - ▶ How much does success depend on opportunities, resources, leadership quality, framing, strategy etc?



# Topics in the Course IV

- ▶ *Civil wars and revolutions:*
  - ▶ When do people try to overthrow the regime and when do they succeed?
  - ▶ To what extent are violent rebellions caused by economic hardship, ethnic division or state fragility?
  - ▶ Is ethnic conflict due to inequalities between ethnic groups or elites mobilising on ethnic lines?
  - ▶ How well can we predict state failure and civil war?

# Topics in the Course V

## Social Cleavages

### ▶ *Ethnicity:*

- ▶ Why do ethnic minorities vote overwhelmingly for parties of the left when many have socially conservative attitudes?
- ▶ Why are some people more hostile to immigration than others?
- ▶ Why have radical or populist right parties, leaders and causes (including Brexit and Trump) done so well recently?

### ▶ *Religion:*

- ▶ Are rich countries becoming more secular?
- ▶ How powerful is religion as a driving force for social attitudes and political behaviour?
- ▶ Is there a fundamental tension between Islam and democracy?

### ▶ *Gender:*

- ▶ Are there really substantial differences in the political preferences of men and women?
- ▶ Why are older women more right wing than men of the same age but younger women more left-wing than younger men?
- ▶ What difference does it make if there are more women MPs?

# Topics in the Course VI

## ▶ *Nationalism:*

- ▶ What is it and where does it come from?
- ▶ Why do some people think of their nationality in ethnic terms while others think on more civic lines?
- ▶ Is national pride declining in favour of a supra-national identity in Europe?
- ▶ What strengthens nationalists movements and what are their consequences?

## ▶ *Class:*

- ▶ Why has class voting declined?
- ▶ Do different social classes increasingly want the same policies?
- ▶ Or are the parties increasingly offering very similar policies on taxation and spending?
- ▶ Do people even think of themselves as members of social classes?

# Topics in the Course VII

## **Class issues more broadly**

- ▶ *Political elites:*
  - ▶ Does democracy ensure power is evenly divided or is there a political elite operates as a clique and is extremely powerful?
  - ▶ Are elected politicians beholden to business elites?
  - ▶ How can social scientists identify who has power and how they use it when you cannot trust those in authority to report accurately?
  - ▶ Do elites exercise power overtly or more subtly through agenda setting and ideological persuasion?

## Topics in the Course VIII

- ▶ *Support for welfare provision:*
  - ▶ Why do some countries have more generous welfare provision than others?
  - ▶ Do ethnically divided societies have more limited welfare states because richer ethnic groups do not want to see their money redistributed to poorer ones?
  - ▶ How much has (support for) welfare provision been eroded by globalisation?
  - ▶ Why do some richer people support redistribution when others do not?

## Aims: Search for Causation I

- ▶ Main aim of most of the research is to try to say something about the causes of the outcome in question, e.g.
  - ▶ Does interpersonal trust in society lead to better democracy?
  - ▶ Does economic growth reduce the chances of state failure?
- ▶ Some of the 'why' questions demand answers about causes, e.g.
  - ▶ *Why has turnout declined?* is equivalent to *What factors cause turnout and have changed (or causal effects that changed) in a way that would produce turnout decline?*
- ▶ It is interesting and important to know some of the social facts in the area (e.g. turnout has declined but petition signing has increased over time etc.)
- ▶ But ultimately we want to understand the causal processes that drive these phenomena.

## Aims: Search for Causation II

- ▶ Need causal theories
  - ▶ These are positive rather than normative
  - ▶ i.e. about what does happen rather than what should happen
  - ▶ they posit causal relationships
- ▶ Need to be clear on terms and social scientific concepts, e.g. social capital, political culture
  - ▶ Still plenty of room for conceptual analysis!
- ▶ Important still to know historical narratives, country context and event specific issues
  - ▶ Often helpful for theory building and scrutinising the quantitative research
  - ▶ E.g. helps avoid crass application of theories to inappropriate context

# Looking for general tendencies I

- ▶ Social science typically tries to identify general rather than specific causal relationships
- ▶ e.g. What causes revolutions? Rather than, what are the causes of the French revolution?
- ▶ Suggests general theories and hypotheses
  - ▶ e.g. Fiscal crises of the state lead to revolutions
- ▶ Not laws but tendencies that are not too specific to particular times and places.
- ▶ Need variance on both the explanatory and dependent variables
  - ▶ e.g. we learn about causes of revolutions by finding out what separates cases with revolutions from those without
- ▶ Comparative politics aims to replace proper names with variables.



## Looking for general tendencies II

- ▶ Search for general tendencies among large populations leads to preference for large data sets and quantitative analyses rather than qualitative studies of specific phenomenon
  - ▶ But large scale quantitative analysis often involves crude operationalisation of variables
  - ▶ Qualitative studies usually very useful for understanding the range of causal mechanisms in detail

# Putting the Science in Social Science

- ▶ What (supposedly) makes it science is the attempt to use deductive logic with theory generating hypotheses, which are then tested systematically with data.
- ▶ Causal theory → Hypothesis → Empirical test → Evaluation of the hypothesis → Evaluation of the causal theory → Scientific knowledge
- ▶ Can apply this process with qualitative data (see King, Keohane and Verba, 1994)
  - ▶ But since much of the literature is quantitative and it is important to have a rough understanding of the very basics of the statistics, focus of the rest of this methodological discussion on issues with quantitative work
- ▶ Much (social) science inductive, not deductive
- ▶ Key process in science is systematic method and scrutiny

# Experiments

- ▶ Randomized control trials are ideal for identifying causal effects
  - ▶ If the allocation of the explanatory variable  $x$  is truly random, then any correlation with  $y$  must be due to  $x$
  - ▶ Some even say, there is no causation without manipulation.
- ▶ Problems
  - ▶ Lab experiments artificial (e.g. getting people to watch news clips to assess media effects)
  - ▶ Field experiments (e.g. randomly sending get-out-the-vote leaflets) are great but limited scope
- ▶ Occasionally there are natural experiments or contexts where regression discontinuity designs apply
- ▶ Have to use more mundane observational studies for most questions

# Temporal Ordering

- ▶ Correlation at a single point in time often inadequate to be clear on causal direction.
  - ▶  $x \rightarrow y$  or  $x \leftarrow y$  or  $x \leftrightarrow y$
- ▶ Temporal ordering often makes causal arguments more convincing
  - ▶ e.g. if current levels of democracy are linked with prior levels of social capital, then we are more confident that social capital affects democracy
  - ▶ This doesn't always work
    - ▶ There are cases where people anticipate future events and adjust behaviour accordingly
    - ▶ Christmas cards do not cause Christmas

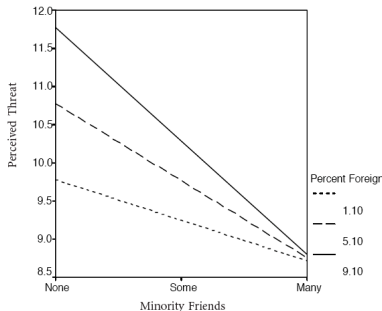
# How to criticise quantitative research I

- ▶ Your undergraduate courses don't provide adequate training to thoroughly understand the more sophisticated statistical methods. So,
  - ▶ Understand broadly what is going on
  - ▶ Take the technical details on trust if needs be
- ▶ Assess four causal hurdles
  1. Is there a credible causal mechanism that connects X to Y ?
  2. Can we rule out the possibility that Y could cause X?
  3. Is there covariation between X and Y ?
    - ▶ i.e. is the regression coefficient significant
  4. Have we controlled for all confounding variables (Z) that might make the association between X and Y spurious?

## How to criticise quantitative research II

Example where you could question the causal direction:  
Does having ethnic minority friends lead you to perceive less threat from immigrants or the other way round?

FIGURE 2: Interaction, Another View



(McLaren, British Social Attitudes, 2003)

# How to criticise quantitative research III

- ▶ Try to compare and contrast results from different studies
  - ▶ Which are experiments, or convincing causal inference designs?
  - ▶ Which are cross-sectional, and which are over time?
  - ▶ Which are looking at change within individuals over time (panel data) or change in one society at large over time (time series), or some other kinds of design?
  - ▶ When were the studies conducted?
    - ▶ E.g. there may have been just 'trendless fluctuations' in class voting up to the late 1980s but later studies are clear that there has been a decline.
  - ▶ Try to figure out why results differ not just choose which you like best
  - ▶ Most important and profound not the same thing as most rigorous in causal identification.

# How to criticise quantitative research IV

- ▶ We are looking for tendencies, not hard and fast rules.
  - ▶ Interesting to note the outliers, but more important to know the dominant pattern
  - ▶ “Secularization theory doesn’t work for the USA.” is not a devastating critique.
  - ▶ *Exceptions do not prove the rule!*
- ▶ Consider how important your critique is
  - ▶ Say clearly whether you think it is devastating or more minor
  - ▶ Try to be reasonable
    - ▶ Often possible to spin some story for reverse causation, but if you don’t really believe it don’t bother.



## Tips for studying the course

- ▶ Do the topics that you're interested
  - ▶ None are more important or more 'core' than the others
  - ▶ Do them in any order you like
- ▶ **Read broadly!**
  - ▶ Aim to look at everything on the list to get some idea of the main contributions of each
  - ▶ At least read all the abstracts
  - ▶ Use bibliographic software, e.g. Papers, Mendeley
- ▶ Be aware of the normative issues and social facts, but focus on the questions of causal relationships
- ▶ The usual stuff about answering the question set etc.
  - ▶ both for the tutorial and the exam
  - ▶ past exam questions and reading list tell you what kinds of questions could come up in the exam
- ▶ Be prepared to cite research in the exam,
  - ▶ Around 5 items per essay common
  - ▶ Harvard style citations easiest and recommended

# Role of the course lectures

- ▶ Aim of the lectures is to
  - ▶ provide an overview and some background for the topic
  - ▶ review the main points from the readings
  - ▶ help explain the most difficult material
  - ▶ point out things that the literature is shy about
- ▶ Slides at <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~nuff0084/pol1soc>
- ▶ But they are not designed for stand-alone use.
- ▶ I recommend coming to all the lectures, not just the ones you are doing for tutorials:
  - ▶ Gives you a better feel for the style of enquiry
  - ▶ There are often links between topics
  - ▶ In the exam you are not restricted to just using the literature on one topic to answer a given question
  - ▶ Understanding other topics gives you some perspective on what you are focusing on.
- ▶ So please come!

## Lecture Series: Fridays, 12pm, Exam Schools

**MT 2017** by Stephen Fisher

1. Introductory lecture
2. Ethnicity
3. Anti-immigration sentiment and the radical right
4. Religion
5. Gender
6. Class
7. Social attitudes and value change
8. Political Culture and Social Capital

**HT 2018** by Stephen Fisher and Michael Biggs

(order subject to confirmation)

1. Political Participation
2. Electoral turnout
3. Social Movements
4. Support for Welfare Provision
5. Elites
6. Media
7. Nationalism
8. Civil Wars and Revolutions